



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Hip-Hop Colony by

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in 1931 and “*Iwapi risala?*” (track 16) recorded in 1954/5.

Beautifully presented, the information booklet includes, along with a wealth of information, further listening and reading lists for scholars and interested individuals to turn to should they need or want more in-depth details. Janet Topp Fargion includes a page on the British Sound Archive with the website details and also a small selection of photographs including the front cover photo from the ILAM photograph archive.

In addition to its value as a compilation of early *taarab*, I highly recommend the use of this CD as a teaching and listening aid that demonstrates music that is derived from various cultural influences. This is not only a compilation for scholars of the genre, but also an excellent collection of tracks demonstrating the origins of what continues to be an extremely popular east African style.

Boudina McConnachie, ILAM, Rhodes University

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Hip-Hop Colony. DVD. Michael Wanguhu, director, 2007. Chatsworth, CA: Emerge Media Group.

Michael Wanguhu’s documentary film *Hip-Hop Colony* explores the rise of hip-hop – the music and its concomitant styles of dance, dress, and self-presentation – to the apex of national popular culture in the East African nation of Kenya. Wanguhu and his main collaborator, Russell Kenya (credited as the film’s writer), trace the beginning of this process to the mid-nineties, when hip-hop performed in Swahili and Sheng (Nairobi’s slang mixture of Swahili, English, and other languages) began to appear on national radio and television. They focus in particular on Kalamashaka, the first nationally recognized rap group to make extensive use of Swahili. Musically and lyrically influenced by U.S. gangsta rap, Kalamashaka helped to found a tradition of social realist rap in Kenya that continues to this day, though it has been eclipsed (in terms of popularity) by other hip-hop-influenced genres that tend to be less socially conscious and more melodic and danceable.

The title of *Hip-Hop Colony* is taken from a central statement of the film: that hip-hop constitutes “a new breed of colonisation”, one more positive and enabling than British colonialism for its ability “[to connect] youth across race, ethnicity, income, and geographic boundary” (DVD Chapter: “New Colonization”). The metaphor is somewhat ironic in the Kenyan context, given that some of the country’s hip-hop artists (including Kalamashaka) claim to be inspired by Kenya’s famous anti-British insurgent leaders. One questions whether rappers who liken themselves to the Mau Mau freedom fighters would want to be described as “colonised”. Indeed, it is the narrator (a disembodied voice that, for some strange reason, floats over an ominous piano vamp), not any of the artists or producers interviewed, who articulates this metaphor.

Fortunately, the positive aspects of the film tend to compensate for the awkward

hip-hop-as-colonialism approach to the question of cultural circulation. In particular, the film features candid interviews and impromptu performances that make for a captivating finished product. Most of the film's footage is culled from what appear to have been quite lengthy interviews – I am tempted to call them “hangs” – with a few artists, one of which was taped while the interviewee, an artist known as Dobeetz, was putting the finishing touches on a striking mural of Tupac Shakur. Some of these scenes bear a visual haze that could only come from an attempt to compensate for the low-light conditions under which the original footage was shot. The interviews and performances that appear this way are often among the most candid and interesting of the film, perhaps in part due to the small size of the production crew. Wanguhu deserves credit here for turning a limitation into a strength. Also to his credit, Wanguhu shows restraint in his use of stock footage from music videos and live performances, of which there is certainly enough available for hours of montages.

Wanguhu (and Russell Kenya) arrange interviews with members of the rap group Kalamashaka and their most famous producer, Tedd Josiah, to present a narrative of the birth of Kenyan hip-hop. Josiah explains that when the first private FM radio stations were introduced in the mid-nineties most of the programming “was just hip-hop, R&B, rock – everything apart from Kenyan music”. He goes on to theorise that “a lot of young people, when they started seeing the music videos [and] hearing the music on the radio, started saying, ‘Look, I can do that, but I can do that with my language. And I can make that hip-hop into my culture’” (DVD Chapter: “Railroad of Influence”). As this quote demonstrates, Wanguhu managed to catch Josiah in a particularly humble mood. Another possible perspective would give Josiah himself quite a bit of credit in the indigenisation of African American and Jamaican music in Kenya.

At the center of the film's narrative of the birth of Kenyan hip-hop is a song entitled “*Tafsiri Hii*”, performed by Kalamashaka and produced by Josiah. Kenyan bloggers and mainstream reporters have already made the story of this song into a kind of originary tale of Kenyan hip-hop. *Hip-Hop Colony* re-presents this tale in its purest form, no doubt helping to crystallise it for future commentators. In the film, Kamau, one of the members of Kalamashaka, says that “‘*Tafsiri Hii*’ started Kenyan music [!]”.

...’Cause after that...all rich kids, kids from the hood, *wote wakaanza ku-rhyme* [they all began to rhyme]...All of them started, *wakaanza kuandika* [they began to write] rhymes in Swahili. People were writing rhymes [before that], but they were rhyming in English. And most of them...they were biting [i.e. stealing] all their rhymes from other rappers from the States. So when they heard “Tafsiri,” people knew they can write rhymes in Swahili. So it's like we started the Swahili rap (DVD Chapter: “Kalamashaka”).

Undoubtedly, the success of “*Tafsiri Hii*” represented a sea change in Kenyan youth music. However, the claim that it was the first “Swahili rap” in Kenya is ultimately unsustainable, and one need go no further than the extended material in the *Hip-Hop Colony* DVD to find this out. In the DVD's “Bonus Section” we are introduced to David

Muriithi, “one of the pioneers of Kenyan hip-hop”, who stresses that a little-known artist named MC Mikey was rapping in Swahili while Kalamashaka were still fumbling with English rhymes.

It is to Wanguhu’s credit that he includes David Muriithi’s interview in the DVD release. Implicitly, it stands as an admission that the history of Kenyan hip-hop presented in *Hip-Hop Colony* is not only incomplete; it is, in fact, just one of a number of possible versions (each one of which may be just as “true” as any of the others). But while this late addition stands as a testament to Wanguhu’s intellectual honesty, it also draws attention to the fragility of the narrative he presents in the film. Perceptive viewers are, of course, likely to take Kamau’s claims of “[starting] Swahili rap” with a grain of salt. But only those with a more intimate knowledge of hip-hop in Kenya will have any sense of just how much rap in Swahili and other vernacular languages was being produced and performed in Kenya before Kalamashaka and Tedd Josiah managed to garner national attention with “*Tafsiri Hii*”.

Hip-Hop Colony would have been a quite different film had Wanguhu been committed to tracing the actual origins of Kenya’s Swahili-language rap. Among other things, such a commitment would have engendered a decentering of Nairobi as the geographical focus of the film. As Kenya’s political, economic, and media capital, Nairobi is undeniably the focal point of youth music in Kenya today; however, it was *not* the wellspring of Swahili hip-hop in the country. For the early history of Swahili-language rap (in the late eighties and early nineties) one must look to the coast, the area of Kenya where Swahili is generally spoken as a primary language of social intercourse.

I cannot claim to have fully pieced together the history of Swahili rap that is missing in *Hip-Hop Colony*; however, I can say with relative certainty that Kenya’s first practitioners of this genre were young Swahili speakers from the port city of Mombasa. They were not *ethnically* Swahili: the cosmopolitan musical interests of Kenya’s Muslim Swahili community were directed more toward Mumbai and Amman than Los Angeles and New York. Kenya’s first Swahili rappers were Luo, Kisii, Kamba, Kikuyu, and others of upcountry origin who had lived long enough in Mombasa to take on Standard Swahili as a first or second language. Mombasan rappers such as Buda Boaz and Fundi Frank – the latter appears in the film, discussing his hip-hop clothing designs and his love of early U.S. rap – pioneered Kenyan Swahili rap in the decade leading up to the release of “*Tafsiri Hii*”. It would appear also that much of Kenya’s *non*-Swahili vernacular hip-hop originated within these same Mombasan communities of upcountry origin: for example, the late Mombasan artist Poxi Presha (briefly mentioned in the film) is widely credited as the first Luo-language rapper.

So how or why did the coastal history of Kenyan hip-hop get left out of *Hip-Hop Colony*? It appears that the omission stems from the film’s overriding focus on vernacular hip-hop as *national* popular culture. One cannot fault Wanguhu for this focus. The status

of hip-hop in the national imaginary has even transformed the genre into a major political tool in Kenya: the National Rainbow Coalition appears to have succeeded in the 2002 national election in part thanks to their Luo/Swahili/English theme song performed by the hip-hop duo Gidi Gidi and Maji Maji. It is unfortunate, though – especially for today’s struggling artists on the coast – that the film conflates the history of *Nairobi* hip-hop with the history of *Kenyan* hip-hop.

While viewers unfamiliar with Kenyan hip-hop are not likely to notice what is missing from the historical narrative, they may find something strange about one of the film’s central figures, an artist named Bamboo, who appears again and again with a few other artists in black and white segments throughout the film. Bamboo’s North American accent and slight difficulty with Swahili (he gets himself tongue-tied at one point trying to get through a Swahili verse) are difficult to miss. Many viewers will no doubt wonder why we are never provided with any details of his life and career.

Though we do not get this information in the film, the fact is that Bamboo did spend much of his childhood in the United States, and he continues to move back and forth between there and Kenya. (He was even present at the U.S. premiere of *Hip-Hop Colony*.) This is not to argue that Bamboo is not “Kenyan” enough for the central role he plays in *Hip-Hop Colony*. On the contrary, he may deserve even more credit than he usually gets for his influence in Kenyan popular culture. His group, *K-South*, by all accounts, bestowed the popular nickname “Nairobbery” on the Kenyan capital; and they also coined the onomatopoeic term “*kapuka*” as a genre title for Kenya’s more commercial, Congolese-influenced hip-hop.

The main reason for mentioning Bamboo’s connection to the U.S. is that Wanguhu appears to have missed an opportunity to delve into the issue of cultural circulation in a more sophisticated and interesting way than is accomplished through the use of the colonialism metaphor. Here we have an artist who has moved not just with his imagination and expression, but with his physical self as well, between Kenya and the U.S. It is difficult to argue that this fact is purely academic, especially when Bamboo lectures the film’s viewers on cosmopolitanism in Nairobi: “Cultures from all over the world come and meet in Nairobi, East Africa,” he tells the camera over a guitar vamp. “So get that right. It’s not Shaka Zulu, man. It’s not Kunta Kinte, man. This place, Nairobi – yo, dog. Everybody’s got their own little mobile phone. Does that look native to you?” (DVD Chapter: “The Influence”).

The knowledge that Bamboo has been able to (re)connect with youths in Nairobi through the medium of African American expressive culture in his personal life as much as his musical career makes these words far more poignant.

In other ways, too, those who are familiar with Bamboo’s background are privy to an otherwise hidden layer of meaning in the film. A case in point involves the aforementioned term “*kapuka*”. Near the end of the film, we find Bamboo and a collection of other

artists, including Kamau from Kalamashaka, hanging out, drinks in hands, riffing on a K-South song from 2004. There is no explanation offered to the uninitiated of what they are performing; there aren't even English subtitles provided. Here is my own translation of the climactic phrase: "And as for all those emcees who are so bewitching [*wanaroga*] / Leave them to use their one and only beat: / *kapuka* this, *kapuka* that, *kapuka* this, *kapuka* that..."

This is the aforementioned disparaging song that coined the term "*kapuka*", which is still used as a genre title today. It may have been a very conscious decision on Wanguhu's part not to delve too deeply into the rifts that have emerged between "underground" rappers and those artists who are considered more commercially oriented. After all, one of the main aims of the film, as we learn in the "Bonus Section", is to present a more positive image of life in Africa. The artists, for their part, appear to appreciate this approach. Even one of Bamboo's favorite "*kapuka*" targets, Nameless, was sanguine in his on-camera reaction after viewing *Hip-Hop Colony*: "I was surprised to see how much talent we have in Kenya!"

As a final word, it is worth placing *Hip-Hop Colony* in its own generic context. This film stands as an example of how the hip-hop documentary film is today undergoing its own global diffusion. In 2006, Stanford University held an entire film festival devoted to documentaries about hip-hop music and culture outside the U.S. (*Hip-Hop Colony* was one of the featured films). The directors of these films and others like them hail from various parts of the world, often but not always the very places their films cover.

Some of the emerging documentary films on global hip-hop are the work of trained ethnographers (for example, Shipley 2007; Tsai 2005), and these directors are certain to be joined by other intrepid ethnographers in the future. But most of the directors of global hip-hop documentaries are filmmakers first and foremost, and their decisions to deal with hip-hop have been more influenced by Curtis Hanson's Eminem biopic, *8 Mile* (2002), than the work of cinematic ethnographers like Jean Rouch. Such is the case with Michael Wanguhu and his *Hip-Hop Colony*, as Wanguhu admitted in an interview (Booth 2005). Thus, unlike Shipley's film on Ghanaian hiplife (2007), Wanguhu's *Hip-Hop Colony* is geared less toward a scholarly audience than toward an audience of Kenyan hip-hop acolytes and U.S. film festival judges and attendees. Even so, *Hip-Hop Colony* is a fascinating and important documentary for scholars of African popular music and culture. Not only is it the most in-depth study of Kenyan hip-hop to date, it is also a work that pokes and prods at the provocative issues of cultural ownership inherent in all global hip-hop.

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